

CHAPTER 21 - THE CAPTURE OF CAP'N BILL

While this was transpiring in the palace, Cap'n Bill and the Pinkies had encamped before the principal gate of the City and a tent had been pitched for Trot and Button-Bright and Rosalie. The army had been very fearful and weak-kneed when it first entered the Blue Country, but perceiving that the Boolooroo and his people were afraid of them and had locked themselves up in the City, the Pinkies grew bolder and longed to make an attack.

One of them, in his curiosity to examine the Blue City, got a little too near the wall, and a blue soldier threw his cord-and-weight at him. The cord didn't wind around the Pinkie, as he was too far off, but the weight hit him in the eye and made him howl lustily as he trotted back to his comrades at full speed. After this experience, the invaders were careful to keep a safe distance from the wall.

The Boolooroo, having made all preparations to receive the enemy, was annoyed because they held back. He was himself so nervous and excited that he became desperate, and after an hour of tedious waiting, during which time he pranced around impatiently, he decided to attack the hated Pinkies and rid the country of them.

"Their dreadful color makes me hysterical," he said to his soldiers, "so if I am to have any peace of mind, we must charge the foe and drive them back into the Fog Bank. But take all the prisoners you can, my brave men, and tomorrow we will have a jolly time patching them. Don't be afraid; those pink creatures have no blue blood in their veins, and they'll run like rabbits when they see us coming."

Then he ordered the gate thrown open, and immediately the Blueskins poured out into the open plain and began to run toward the Pinkies. The Boolooroo went out, too, but he kept well behind his people, remembering the sharp sticks with which the enemy were armed.

Cap'n Bill was alert and had told his army what to do in case of an attack. The Pinkies did not run like rabbits, but formed a solid line and knelt down with their long, sharp sticks pointed directly toward the Blueskins, the other ends being set firmly upon the ground. Of course, the Blueskins couldn't run against these sharp points, so they halted a few feet away and began swinging their cord-and-weights. But the Pinkies were too close together to be caught in this manner, and now by command of Cap'n Bill they suddenly rose to their

feet and began jabbing their sticks at the foe. The Blueskins hesitated until a few got pricked and began to yell with terror, when the whole of the Boolooroo's attacking party turned around and ran back to the gate, their Ruler reaching it first of all. The Pinkies tried to chase them, but their round, fat legs were no match for the long, thin legs of the Blueskins, who quickly gained the gate and shut themselves up in the City again.

"It is evident," panted the Boolooroo, facing his defeated soldiers wrathfully, "that you are a pack of cowards!"

"But we followed your own royal example in running," replied the Captain.

"I merely ran back to the City to get a drink of water, for I was thirsty," declared the Boolooroo.

"So did we! So did we!" cried the soldiers eagerly. "We were all thirsty."

"Your High and Mighty Spry and Flighty Majesty," remarked the Captain respectfully, "it occurs to me that the weapons of the Pinkies are superior to our own. What we need in order to oppose them successfully is a number of sharp sticks which are longer than their own."

"True, true!" exclaimed the Boolooroo enthusiastically. "Get to work at once and make yourselves long, sharp sticks, and then we will attack the enemy again."

So the soldiers and citizens all set to work preparing long, sharp sticks, and while they were doing this, Rosalie the Witch had a vision in which she saw exactly what was going on inside the City wall. Queen Trot and Cap'n Bill and Button-Bright saw the vision, too, for they were all in the tent together, and the sight made them anxious.

"What can be done?" asked the girl. "The Blueskins are bigger and stronger than the Pinkies, and if they have sharp sticks which are longer than ours, they will surely defeat us."

"I have one magic charm," said Rosalie thoughtfully, "that will save our army; but I am allowed to work only one magic charm every three days--not oftener--and perhaps I'll need the magic for other things."

"Strikes me, ma'am," returned the sailor, "that what we need most on this expedition is to capture the Blueskins. If we don't, we'll need plenty of magic

to help us back to the Pink Country; but if we do, we can take care of ourselves without magic."

"Very well," replied Rosalie. "I will take your advice, Cap'n, and enchant the weapons of the Pinkies." She then went out and had all the Pinkies come before her, one by one, and she enchanted their sharp sticks by muttering some cabalistic words and making queer passes with her hands over the weapons. "Now," she said to them, "you will be powerful enough to defeat the Blueskins whatever they may do." The Pinkies were overjoyed at this promise, and it made them very brave indeed, since they now believed they would surely be victorious.

When the Boolooroo's people were armed with long, thin, lances of bluewood all sharpened to fine points at one end, they prepared to march once more against the invaders. Their sticks were twice as long as those of the Pinkies, and the Boolooroo chuckled with glee to think what fun they would have in punching holes in the round, fat bodies of his enemies.

Out from the gate they marched very boldly and pressed on to attack the Pinkies, who were drawn up in line of battle to receive them, with Cap'n Bill at their head. When the opposing forces came together, however, and the Blueskins pushed their points against the Pinkies, the weapons which had been enchanted by Rosalie began to whirl in swift circles--so swift that the eye could scarcely follow the motion. The result was that the lances of the Boolooroo's people could not touch the Pinkies, but were thrust aside with violence and either broken in two or sent hurling through the air in all directions. Finding themselves so suddenly disarmed, the amazed Blueskins turned about and ran again, while Cap'n Bill, greatly excited by his victory, shouted to his followers to pursue the enemy, and hobbled after them as fast as he could make his wooden leg go, swinging his sharp stick as he advanced.

The Blues were in such a frightened, confused mass that they got in one another's way and could not make very good progress on the retreat, so the old sailor soon caught up with them and began jabbing at the crowd with his stick. Unfortunately, the Pinkies had not followed their commander, being for the moment dazed by their success, so that Cap'n Bill was all alone among the Blueskins when he stepped his wooden leg into a hole in the ground and tumbled full length, his sharp stick flying from his hand and pricking the Boolooroo in the leg as it fell.

At this, the Ruler of the Blues stopped short in his flight to yell with terror, but seeing that only the sailorman was pursuing them and that this solitary

foe had tumbled flat upon the ground, he issued a command and several of his people fell upon poor Cap'n Bill, seized him in their long arms, and carried him struggling into the City, where he was fast bound.

Then a panic fell upon the Pinkies at the loss of their leader, and Trot and Button-Bright called out in vain for them to rescue Cap'n Bill. By the time the army recovered their wits and prepared to obey, it was too late. And although Trot ran with them in her eagerness to save her friend, the gate was found to be fast barred, and she knew it was impossible for them to force an entrance into the City.

So she went sorrowfully back to the camp, followed by the Pinkies, and asked Rosalie what could be done.

"I'm sure I do not know," replied the Witch. "I cannot use another magic charm until three days have expired, but if they do not harm Cap'n Bill during that time, I believe I can then find a way to save him."

"Three days is a long time," remarked Trot dismally.

"The Boolooroo may decide to patch him at once," added Button-Bright with equal sadness, for he, too, mourned the sailor's loss.

"It can't be helped," replied Rosalie. "I am not a fairy, my dears, but merely a witch, and so my magic powers are limited. We can only hope that the Boolooroo won't patch Cap'n Bill for three days."

When night settled down upon the camp of the Pinkies, where many tents had now been pitched, all the invaders were filled with gloom. The band tried to enliven them by playing the "Dead March," but it was not a success. The Pinkies were despondent in spite of the fact that they had repulsed the attack of the Blues, for as yet they had not succeeded in gaining the City or finding the Magic Umbrella, and the blue dusk of this dread country--which was so different from their own land of sunsets--made them all very nervous. They saw the moon rise for the first time in their lives, and its cold, silvery radiance made them shudder and prevented them from going to sleep. Trot tried to interest them by telling them that on the Earth the people had both the sun and the moon and loved them both; but nevertheless it is certain that had not the terrible Fog Bank stood between them and the Pink Land, most of the invading army would have promptly deserted and gone back home.

Trot couldn't sleep, either, she was so worried over Cap'n Bill. She went back to the tent where Rosalie and Button-Bright were sitting in the moonlight and

asked the Witch if there was no way in which she could secretly get into the City of the Blues and search for her friend. Rosalie thought it over for some time and then replied:

"We can make a rope ladder that will enable you to climb to the top of the wall and descend into the City. But if anyone should see you, you would be captured."

"I'll risk that," said the child, excited at the prospect of gaining the side of Cap'n Bill in this adventurous way. "Please make the rope ladder at once, Rosalie!"

So the Witch took some ropes and knotted together a ladder long enough to reach the top of the wall. When it was finished, the three--Rosalie, Trot and Button-Bright--stole out into the moonlight and crept unobserved into the shadow of the wall. The Blueskins were not keeping a very close watch, as they were confident the Pinkies could not get into the City.

The hardest part of Rosalie's task was to toss up one end of the rope ladder until it would catch on some projection on top of the wall. There were few such projections, but after creeping along the wall for a distance, they saw the end of a broken flagstaff near the top edge. The Witch tossed up the ladder, trying to catch it upon this point, and on the seventh attempt she succeeded.

"Good!" cried Trot. "Now I can climb up."

"Don't you want me to go with you?" asked Button-Bright a little wistfully.

"No," said the girl. "You must stay to lead the army. And if you can think of a way, you must try to rescue us. Perhaps I'll be able to save Cap'n Bill by myself; but if I don't, it's all up to you, Button-Bright."

"I'll do my best," he promised.

"And here, keep my polly till I come back," added Trot, giving him the bird. "I can't take it with me, for it would be a bother, an' if it tried to spout po'try, I'd be discovered in a jiffy."

As the beautiful Witch kissed the little girl goodbye, she slipped upon her finger a curious ring. At once, Button-Bright exclaimed, "Why, where has she gone?"

"I'm right here," said Trot's voice by his side. "Can't you see me?"

"No," replied the boy, mystified.

Rosalie laughed. "It's a magic ring I've loaned you, my dear," said she, "and as long as you wear it, you will be invisible to all eyes, those of Blueskins and Pinkies alike. I'm going to let you wear this wonderful ring, for it will save you from being discovered by your enemies. If at any time you wish to be seen, take the ring from your finger; but as long as you wear it, no one can see you, not even Earth people."

"Oh, thank you!" cried Trot. "That will be fine."

"I see you have another ring on your hand," said Rosalie, "and I perceive it is enchanted in some way. Where did you get it?"

"The Queen of the Mermaids gave it to me," answered Trot. "But Sky Island is so far away from the sea that the ring won't do me any good while I'm here. It's only to call the mermaids to me if I need them, and they can't swim in the sky, you see."

Rosalie smiled and kissed her again. "Be brave, my dear," she said, "and I am sure you will be able to find Cap'n Bill without getting in danger yourself. But be careful not to let any Blueskin touch you, for while you are in contact with any person you will become visible. Keep out of their way, and you will be perfectly safe. Don't lose the ring, for you must give it back to me when you return. It is one of my witchcraft treasures, and I need it in my business."

The Trot climbed the ladder, although neither Button-Bright nor Rosalie could see her do so, and when she was on top the broad wall she pulled up the knotted ropes and began to search for a place to let it down on the other side. A little way off she found a bluestone seat near to the inner edge, and attaching the ladder to this, she easily descended it and found herself in the Blue City. A guard was pacing up and down near her, but as he could not see the girl, he of course paid no attention to her. So after marking the place where the ladder hung that she might know how to reach it again, Trot hurried away through the streets of the city.